

## *The Post-Standard*

### **Program Lodges Spirit**

*December 20, 2002*

Snow has been falling regularly for several weeks, heartening those wishing for a traditional white Christmas. Carols are playing just about everywhere as shoppers hit stores for their annual holiday gift-buying.

Tradition and feelings of good will are big this time of the year.

And a group of local lawyers has been doing its best this week to add to a goodwill tradition of its own: providing free legal service to people facing eviction just before the holidays.

Billed as "Home for the Holidays," the four-day project marked its third year in Syracuse City Court last week.

"There have been a lot of kids this year," Legal Services of Central New York Executive Director Dennis Kaufman said. One woman he represented was facing eviction with her three children, and a second woman had four children and a fifth on the way.

"Tenants not represented by attorneys normally get evicted. When tenants have vigorous representation, the outcome is much different," Legal Services lawyer Lewis Liebler said Wednesday as he joined about six other lawyers doing pro bono work.

Across four days, lawyers from Legal Services and the Frank H. Hiscock Legal Aid Society, along with a number of private lawyers - six of them from the Mackenzie Hughes firm on one day - working through the Onondaga County Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyer Project, offered assistance to people who went before City Judge Jeffrey Merrill.

About three dozen cases, involving 123 people facing eviction, were handled, according to Volunteer Lawyer Project Director Barbara Romeo.

**Romeo said** the lawyers prevented 13 evictions, had two others dismissed and one other put off until after the holidays for a trial.

Seventeen evictions were delayed, giving families additional time to find new housing, Romeo said. And in three other cases, the lawyers were not able to get extensions but were able to avert judgments against the tenants.

Heather Stimpson and her son, 7, were facing an eviction proceeding Wednesday when she was introduced to Liebler. The landlord was claiming Stimpson owed \$2,750 in back

rent, but Stimpson told Liebler she was planning to move out anyway because of the poor condition of her West Belden Avenue residence.

With Liebler's help, Stimpson was given until Dec. 29 to move. The landlord was not awarded any money.

"I think it's great," Stimpson said of the free legal service when she returned to court Thursday with a friend who was facing eviction from another of the same landlord's properties.

"It's a lot better than having to get myself out before Christmas," she said.

Liebler on Thursday also helped Larry Bell keep his Columbus Avenue residence through the holidays and into the new year. Bell had recently been approved to have the federal government subsidize part of his monthly rent, but the government's portion of the December rent was going to be delayed until January, and the landlord was reluctant to wait.

Liebler explained the situation in court and the landlord, who had already received Bell's portion of the December rent, agreed to wait for the government's portion. "I get to keep my place," Bell said, adding that without counsel, he wouldn't have known what to say in court and would have lost the case.

About half of the people on the court's eviction calendar failed to show up, Kaufman said, noting those people unfortunately miss out on the free legal help being offered.

One of the private lawyers offering her help Wednesday was Edwina Schleider, whose regular law practice involves representing landlords in similar matters.

"This makes me feel very good coming here and doing this," she said, noting she regularly volunteers her services to tenants at eviction court once a month.